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WOMEN AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

American women are abusing alcohol in surprising numbers and with alarming results. Of the 15.1 million people in the United States who abuse alcohol, nearly a third are women.

Although television, movies and popular songs celebrate the differences between men and women, scientific research is just beginning to catch on to the need for gender-based health studies. For this reason, most of our assumptions about female drinkers are based on older research conducted on men. Only recently have women been included in studies that examine how alcohol affects female bodies, which kinds of treatment work best for them, and what types of preventive efforts are most successful in reaching women.

The new studies show that when women drink the same amount of alcohol as men, they undergo a quicker and stronger physiological reaction than men, even if their weight is the same. Although the reasons for this difference are not fully understood, it appears that women absorb far more of the alcohol they consume in a more concentrated form than men do. In fact, the less a woman weighs, the longer it takes her body to get rid of the alcohol. A woman who weighs 120 pounds, for

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example, will take more than two and one-half hours to “burn up” a single drink.

For the last 40 years, the number of women in the United States who drink has continued to increase steadily. According to a study by the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, nearly one fifth of college women now show signs of alcohol dependency, while an estimated 16 percent of young, employed women drink between three and five drinks every day.

Despite their increasing numbers, however, women who abuse alcohol are not always noticed. Society does not look kindly on women who drink too much; it stigmatizes them as morally deficient and loose. Whereas men who drink are apt to be viewed as good time Charlies who know how to have fun. female alcohol abusers tend to hide their drinking, often within the privacy of their homes. For this reason, they are less likely to come to the attention of family and friends until their mental and physical health is in jeopardy.

The long-term effects of alcohol abuse on women are-serious-and-include:

- anemia,
- dehydration due to diarrhea,
- malnutrition,
- damage to the liver, heart and pancreas,
- cirrhosis of the liver (women develop cirrhosis more quickly than men do even though they consume less alcohol),
- gynecological problems (infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirths),
- circulatory disorders,

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- increased risk of cancer of the breast, neck and head, and
- rape and other violent attacks: accidents and suicide.

A pregnant woman who drinks courts additional dangers. Miscarriage and stillbirth have been linked to heavy drinking. Tragically, some babies born to alcoholic women have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome(FAS). FAS can cause stunted growth, heart defects, cleft palate and epilepsy, and is a leading known cause of mental retardation. These problems continue through adulthood.

Since women tend to be so careful about concealing their drinking, they are much less likely than men to come to the attention of police for driving under the influence, or to arouse concern in the workplace. Where men will often change their drinking behavior once job performance problems are detected, female alcohol abusers tend to escape identification on-the-job. Also, women are more likely to react favorably to suggestions for change if health concerns or family problems are linked to their use of alcohol. For this reason, efforts are now underway to educate health providers about the special problems of women who abuse alcohol and to encourage care givers to screen for alcohol problems as part of routine office or clinic visits.

If you suspect that a female friend, relative or loved one is drinking too much, take action. Alcohol abuse is a progressive condition that usually gets worse the longer it continues.

How do we know if someone we care about is abusing alcohol? It is not always easy so we must be especially sensitive to the clues they give us. Following

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are some behavioral examples which may indicate problems:

- The cocktail hour: its importance to the woman, the frequency, the duration, how much she drinks and how fast she drinks it.
- The workplace: Is she absent or tardy 'often? Does she leave early? Is she angry at work or more difficult to get along with?
- The home: Is she sometimes too strict and then unusually loving with her children? Does she have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep? Does she make phone calls at odd hours? Does she seem depressed?

There may be other signs; the key is to observe changes and act on them.

Among the steps that can be taken to help are the following

- Educate yourself about alcohol so you can understand something about what your friend or loved one is experiencing. The public library is full of appropriate materials. You can also get information from organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and Women for Sobriety. All of these are self-help groups which are located throughout the country.
- Although it may be difficult, it is important to let a female friend or relative know that you are concerned about her alcohol use. Ignoring the problem only allows her health to further deteriorate.
- Time your discussion carefully. Make sure your friend is sober. Some experts suggest raising the subject while she is still hungover or after an unpleasant family scene. Morning is usually the best time.

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- Tell your friend that you are concerned about her health and explain how it is affecting you. Sometimes it is effective to mention an incident where her behavior has been out of character. Let her know that you are available whenever she needs your support.

Don't be upset if your friend becomes angry when you try to talk with her. Denial is a part of alcoholism; it often takes time for the abuser to accept that she has a problem. Keep in mind that her health is more important than any anger she may feel toward you. Her very life may be at stake.

For further information or guidance, please call the American Council for Drug Education at 1-800-488-DRUG.

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The American Council for Drug Education is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to preventing drug abuse through public education.